DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 613 CS 508 035

AUTHOR Sellnow, Timothy L.; And Others
TITLE Evaluating Internships and Overcoming Program Concerns and Constraints.
PUB DATE 31 Oct 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (78th, Chicago, IL, October 29-November 1, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Degree Requirements; Educational Innovation; *Experiential Learning; Graduate Study; Higher Education; Masters Degrees; *Masters Theses; Program Descriptions; *Speech Communication; Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *North Dakota State University

ABSTRACT

Responding to persistent complaints made by graduate students whose goals did not include college teaching, the department of communication at North Dakota State University (NDSU) in 1991 expanded its internship offerings into the graduate program in the form of the Applied Thesis Option. Justification provided by the department to the graduate dean for this experiential learning experience focused on the claim that the Applied Thesis actually provided benefits that were not available from the traditional thesis approach, and the endorsement of such an option from the communication discipline. The approach found to be effective at NDSU includes three general steps: goal setting; reading the environment; and reflecting. There are four steps in the evaluation process: (1) approval by the major advisor; (2) approval of the prospectus by the student's examining committee; (3) approval of the final project by the student's examining committee; and (4) approval by the graduate school. The finished project papers from the first two graduate students to elect this option received high praise from the graduate dean. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED353613

Evaluating Internships and Overcoming Program Concerns and Constraints

Timothy L. Sellnow, Ph.D.
Robert S. Littlefield, Ph.D.
Deanna D. Sellnow, Ph.D.

Department of Communication

North Dakota State University

Fargo, ND 58105

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Timothy Sellnow

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Presented at the 78th Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association in Chicago, IL

October 31, 1992.

CS508035

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

McCroskey (1979) aptly predicted the changing needs of a growing component of students entering graduate studies in the communication discipline. He argued that "a shift from a single-minded emphasis on research and theory generation to one which recognizes the importance of both knowledge generation and the application of that knowledge" (p. 353) was essential for our discipline to serve those students seeking a graduate degree in order to enhance a career outside the academic setting. The number of students McCroskey described in 1979 has continued to grow. Health care professionals, business administrators, government administrators, secondary education teachers, representatives from nonprofit agencies, and individuals from myriad other occupations have turned to the communication discipline for a graduate education to serve them in the context of their chosen career. Although the specific number is difficult to calculate, few directors of graduate programs in communication would deny that inquiries from potential graduate students who do not intend to teach at the university level have increased during the past decade.

As McCroskey (1979) noted, our approach to graduate education has had a disproportionate emphasis on learning the process of scholarly research. Clearly, these research skills can benefit individuals outside the academic setting. This essay does not dismiss the importance of research in any setting. Instead, the authors argue that graduate programs can benefit from an expanded perspective of what constitutes research. Specifically, this essay justifies and explains the experiential or applied study option as an appropriate alternative for some graduate students, to a more traditional thesis. This applied alternative asks graduate students to solve a practical communication problem in a real world setting.

Internship programs, particularly at the undergraduate level, offer students the opportunity to integrate the theories and skills they have acquired in the academic setting with their practical work experience. The popularity of such programs has increased in recent

years (Hyre & Ownes, 1984; Staley & Shockley-Zalabak, 1985) to a point where "most undergraduate communication programs include departmentally sponsored internships" (Watson, 1992, p. 429). In 1991, the Department of Communication at North Dakota State University decided to expand its internship offerings into the graduate program to better serve the needs of students whose goals did not include college teaching. A persistent complaint made by these graduate students was that the thesis requirement did not serve their practical needs nor did it fit with their educational goals. These students often asked, "Why can't I spend this time writing something that I can use?" This question posed a problem for the graduate faculty. The graduate students wanted something practical and the graduate faculty wanted to ensure that the students were mastering the relevant theories of the discipline. Since the undergraduate internship program offered a means for integrating practical experience and theoretical knowledge, the graduate faculty decided to adapt this internship approach to fit the needs of both the concerned graduate students and the graduate faculty. The result is the Applied Thesis Option. The remainder of this paper is devoted to describing the Applied Thesis Option used by the Department of Communication at North Dakota State University. Specifically, the process for justifying the approach to administration, a description of the procedures and content of this option, and the means for evaluating and maintaining the quality of this option are provided. The ultimate goal of this paper is to provide those who may be interested in developing such an option with the necessary information to do so.

Justifying the Applied Thesis Option to Administration

Once the graduate faculty in the Communication Department agreed to pursue an applied thesis option, it became necessary to secure approval from the graduate dean. The justification provided by the department focused on two areas: 1) claims that the Applied Thesis actually provided benefits that were not available from the traditional thesis approach; and 2) the

endorsement of such an option from the communication discipline. These justifications are detailed in the below.

Benefits

The unique benefits associated with the Applied Thesis Option focus on the context in which the observation takes place. Little (1991) insists that experiential learning opportunities enable students to acquire and test specific skills that are more easily acquired or applied in the field than in the classroom. While a traditional thesis option tests research skills, experiential learning enables students to test the acceptability of their communication skills. The graduate faculty was concerned that these skills go beyond what was traditionally expected of undergraduate interns. Hence, the graduate students are required to identify any communication skills or strategies they intend to use in their work environment and to provide a justification, based on communication theory, for selecting them. The point of this advantage, however, is that the best means for testing these skills is to perform them in a work setting that is similar to or the same as what the student expects will be his or her vocation. Two additional advantages, based upon the work of O'Keefe (1986) were provided. The first of these advantages concerns the active learning that occurs in experiential situations. O'Keefe suggests that critical thinking is enhanced when students apply new communicative strategies to the true contexts of their lives. She uses Piaget's term, decentering, to describe this process of considering alternative viewpoints in a given context. She suggests that passive learning promotes self-centered communication. The second advantage is based on O'Keefe's claim that speakers' ideas continue to develop spontaneously even as they engage in conversation. She explains that "Speaking aloud releases peripheral information that the mind has absorbed, and allows the speaker to express him or herself more fully" (p. 9). Students in an experiential

learning situation are given an ideal opportunity to further develop this aspect of their practical communication competence.

Endorsement

The graduate faculty chose to emphasize three recommendations from the Speech Communication Association to support the Applied Thesis Option. First, the Speech Communication Association (1989) recommends: "All teachers should implement a variety of strategies, situations, and activities to accommodate diverse learning styles" (p. 6). Graduate students who are seeking to improve their performance in a particular work setting represent a different style of learning than graduate students who are preparing for doctoral study. The Applied Thesis option addresses this practical style. Second, the Speech Communication Association's Graduate Council Departmental Review guidelines (1991b) suggests that curriculum offerings be diverse enough to fulfill employees' needs for both well-prepared practitioners and researchers of communication skills (p. 11). The experiential learning option allows for a practical combination of research and communication skills. Third, the Speech Communication Association (1991a) affirms that "improvement in speaking and listening skills is a lifelong project which does not stop when basic speech and language skills are in place" (p. 3). The experiential learning option provides students with a timeless model for identifying, altering, and evaluating their organizational communication.

Student Goals and Objectives

The Applied Thesis Option is a student-centered learning approach. As such, the program is grounded in student goal setting and student assessment of learning. While there are many prescriptions and standards for what constitutes a good experiential education format, the approach we have found to be quite effective in our graduate program at North Dakota State University was adapted from the Off-Campus Experiential Learning Program developed by

Hutchings and Wutzdorff (1988). The Hutchings and Wutzdorff program includes three general steps: 1) goal setting, 2) reading the environment, and 3) reflecting. To explain how these steps work in our program, each step will be described briefly and followed by some examples of application by graduate students at NDSU.

Goal Setting

Hutchings and Wutzdorff (1988) state that goal setting is an "important factor in students' ability to integrate their work into broader learning frameworks" (p. 65). Students conducting an Applied Thesis Option study must set both general and specific goals. In terms of general goals, students must select a context or setting they wish to study and offer reasons for that choice. Students are also expected to describe a problem or a need existing in that setting which their study hopes to address. Finally, students offer a communication theory to be employed as a means by which to either solve the problem or to better understand the nature of the problem.

One graduate student at NDSU, for example, chose to focus on empowering young children to help save the environment. Her context for study was several groups of elementary aged children. The need to be addressed in the study was three-fold:

> The presenters were to gain practical speaking experience in front of a live audience. The children were to gain knowledge about environmental topics. In turn, the community was to benefit from having its young citizens better educated about environmental issues. (Gowen, 1992, p. 1)

Finally, the theory to be applied was leadership through communication, or developing public speaking competence in real life settings.

Specific goals include determining procedures by which to implement these major goals. A review of related literature is crucial at this point in order to support the procedures the

student has chosen. Specific goals for the environmental study mentioned above centered around which specific environmental topics were to be discussed, developing adaptable audience analysis strategies in terms of content, presentation style and application activities, fostering listening and feedback techniques to encourage a participatory environment, and developing visual and audio aids to encourage student involvement and retention of material.

Reading the Environment

Hutchings and Wutzdorff (1988) describe reading the environment as viewing the experience in "untraditional ways" (p. 65). They recommend having students [who are engaged in experiential education] distance themselves from their own experience in an effort to better understand the situation as a whole. Students are asked to describe their selected environments and the impact of their efforts on those environments from a communication perspective. The students' observations are supplemented by information collected from customers and/or other members of the organization.

One graduate student at NDSU has formed general and specific goals around the role of residence hall directors in addressing and meeting the needs of "students older than average" (SOTAs). Since she is a residence hall director, she will need to become a participant observer in the setting. By applying small group communication theories via a qualitative inquiry approach, she can take notes about the setting in "untraditional ways." Her fieldnotes can be separated in terms of low-level descriptions and evaluative interpretations of what she discovers. Her notes will also be further focused through the lens of small group communication theory.

Reflecting

Hutchings and Wutzdorff (1988) state that, in experiential learning, educators should be concerned with what their students do and how well they do it, but they must be even more

concerned about what their students are learning in the process (p. 66). To evaluate this learning process, they state that instructors should ask their students to articulate, for themselves and for others, the knowledge and skills they have obtained and how they can apply such knowledge and skills to other contexts. In the experiential education option, students are asked to reflect in three ways. First, they are asked to offer conclusions regarding the ways in which they felt their communication efforts were successful and unsuccessful. Second, the students offer conclusions regarding the ways in which they felt the communication theories or concepts they used in their studies were or were not of value. Third, the students offer suggestions for further applications regarding the theories/concepts and situations they evaluate. These reflections help students assess their own learning as well as the effectiveness of their study as a whole via written narratives and discussions with the instructor/advisor.

For example, one graduate student at NDSU is conducting a study of her efforts at teaching English as a Second Language to college students. She can keep a reflective journal of her successes and failures in trying to reach these students. This offers her a formative evaluation of her teaching which not only articulates her discoveries, but also provides a grounding for change. She can also use this narrative to articulate how various intercultural communication theories and teaching strategies were or were not valuable in this setting. Finally, she can prepare a summative paper/evaluation offering suggestions to others attempting to teaching English as a Second Language to college students.

Evaluating Student Performance in the Applied Thesis Option

While different in form from the traditional thesis, there is no less attention paid by the graduate faculty to the issue of quality when evaluating the product of the Applied Thesis Option. At North Dakota State University, there are four steps in the process of evaluation: 1) approval by the Major adviser, 2) approval of the prospectus by the student's examining

committee, 3) approval of the final project by the student's examining committee, and 4) approval by the Graduate School.

Initially, the student must obtain the approval of the major advisor for the Applied Thesis Option. Most students electing this option find the selection of a project easily managed because it emerges from their professional career contexts. However, in order to move forward with their projects and papers, they must plan and develop projects to be shaped into a prospectus to be submitted to their adviser. The prospectus must identify the area of study, form a question or purpose to guide the project, discuss practical concerns affecting the project, and suggest ways to assess the project outcomes. The Department subscribes to high standards of composition, often resulting in revisions. When the adviser believes the prospectus has been written satisfactorily, and the project has been clearly planned and developed, the adviser will schedule the prospectus meeting, enabling the student's committee to review, and comment on the project.

The student's examining committee is composed of three members of the graduate faculty within the Department and one faculty representative designated by the Graduate School from outside of the Communication discipline. The student must explain her project and respond to pertinent practical and philosophical questions posed by the committee. The committee may approve the project, recommend modifications in the project plan, or reject the project, based upon the quality of the prospectus and the defense offered by the student. Once a prospectus has been approved, the student may proceed with the project. The major adviser continues to work with the student throughout the completion of the project, ensuring that the plan is followed and the paper meets the expected standards of good composition. Upon completion of the project and paper, the adviser reconvenes the student's committee.

If the prospectus meeting is characterized as formative, the final oral examination is

summative. The student must produce a paper, explain the project, relate the project to the communication discipline, and defend the choices made during the administration of the project design. Because of the applied nature of the project, the committee members often request information from those for which the project was designed or from those who might have been involved with the administration of the project. At the conclusion of the final oral examination, the committee votes to approve or disapprove the paper. If approved, the paper goes to the department chair for review and signature. Before the department chair signs the approval form, the paper must be in a form that is acceptable to the graduate school.

The final approval is at the level of the Graduate School. The Dean reviews all papers for stylistic precision, as well as content. The expectation from the Dean is that the Applied Thesis Option should meet the same standards of scholarship as the Thesis Option. When the paper passes the Dean of the Graduate School's inspection, the candidate receives the Master of Arts degree.

The graduate faculty in the Department of Communication believe that the four levels of assessment guarantee that students electing this option are being held to high standards of quality. Students know that their projects must be carefully planned, developed, implemented, and assessed in order to satisfy their advisers, their graduate committees in the prospectus and final examination, and Dean of the Graduate School.

The perception of the Applied Thesis Option among university administrators and the Graduate Council has been good. This positive reception may be attributed to several factors. Initially, the Dean of the Graduate School and other administrators were interviewed about their perceptions of the Applied Thesis Option. They had two concerns: The paper would need to be of high quality, and the Department would have to demonstrate that an option of this kind was acceptable within the communication discipline.

Meeting the quality issue on the paper was not a problem because the graduate faculty in the department, and the four existing levels of evaluation, assure that the standards will be met. The second concern about finding support from within the communication discipline for the Applied Thesis Option resulted in the preparation of a paper by the Director of Graduate Studies in the Communication Department citing as justification, many of the principles cited earlier in this paper. After the Dean's review, the proposed option was presented to the Graduate Council. Most of their questions addressed the issue of support from within the discipline for the option. Once this was demonstrated, they approved the option.

Several graduate students have elected this option. The first two were ground-breaking for the graduate faculty in the department. As with any new option, the planning for the projects, the development of the prospecti, the implementation of the project designs, and the assessment of the projects' outcomes were somewhat developmental. However, both of the finished project papers received praise from the Graduate Dean for the quality of the writing and the project design.

Other administrators have been complimentary of the option because of the positive feedback they have received from graduate students not planning to pursue the Ph.D. The Department of Communication has a number of secondary teachers pursuing graduate degrees at the present time who have selected this option for just that reason.

In summary, the graduate faculty in the Department of the Communication received the approval of the Graduate Dean and the Graduate Council for the Applied Thesis Option. The quality of the projects and papers has been high because of the four levels of evaluation currently in place within the department and university. The option gained credibility from NDSU administrators because of the communication literature that validated the use of experiential or applied experiences in the graduate programs. Clearly, the addition of the

Applied Thesis Option has been an enhancement for the communication program at North Dakota State University.

References

Gowin, J.S. (1992). An environmental speaking corps as an experiential education opportunity in speech communication. Unpublished master's paper, North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND.

Hutchings, P. & Wutzdorff, A. (Eds.) (1988). Knowing and doing: Learning through experience. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

O'Keefe, V. P. (1986). Affecting critical thinking through speech. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills.

Little, T. C. (1991). History and rationale for experiential learning. National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, (P.A.N.E.L., Paper No. 1).

McCroskey, J.C. (1979). Applied graduate education: An alternative for the future. Communication Education, 28, 354-358.

Rationale kit: Statements supporting Speech Communication. (1991a). Annandale, Virginia: Speech Communication Association.

Speech Communication Association consulting and program assessment service 1991 portfolio. (1991b). Annandale, Virginia: Speech Communication Association.

Teacher certification and preparation standards. (1989). Annandale, Virginia: Speech Communication Association.

Watson, K.W. (1992). An integration of values: Teaching the internship course in a liberal arts environment. Communication Education, 41, 429-439.